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ABSTRACT

A reformulated theory of learned helplessness posits that helplessness may be the outcome of a learning disabled (LD) student's belief of personal or universal helplessness. Motivational, cognitive, and emotional deficits may result. Research on locus of control and persistence as well as on the contrast between mastery (achievement)-oriented behavior and learned helpless behavior indicates that successful, achievement-oriented students take personal responsibility for success rather than ascribing it to external forces. They can account for failure while still maintaining high expectations. Parents can help their learning disabled children decrease their helpless behavior by following a three step program: helping to set realistic achievement goals; helping to develop a plan to achieve the goals; and teaching the child to accept personal responsibility for success or failure by attributing the outcome to effort. (CL)

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# Parental Strategies for Reducing Learned Helpless Behavior Among LD Students

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Recently, researchers in the field of learning disabilities have begun to focus upon non-intellectual variables which influence LD students' academic achievement. These variables include academic self-esteem (Cullin, Boersma, & Chapman, 1981; Tollefson, Tracy, Johnsen, Buenning, & Farmer, 1979; Tollefson, Johnsen, Buenning & Farmer, 1980; Tollefson, Tracy, Johnsen & Chapman, 1981) and attributions for success and failure (Pearl, Bryan, & Donahue, 1980; Tollefson, et al, 1979; 1980; Tollefson, et al, 1981). In particular, researchers are calling attention to the characteristic of learned helplessness which they are observing among learning disabled students (Grimes, 1981; Pearl et al, 1980; Thomas, 1979; Tollefson et al, 1980, 1981).

The theory of learned helplessness explains that when the individual learns that outcomes are not contingent upon his/her response and overgeneralizes the experience of noncontingency to a new situation, learned helplessness results (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale; 1978; Seligman, 1975). The development of helpless behavior is hypothesized to occur as follows. An individual experiences failure and believes that the failure is a valid indicator of his/her ability and the failure is attributed to lack of ability. When presented with a subsequent task which the individual perceives as similar to the task at which he/she has failed, the individual assumes that he/she lacks the ability to complete the task and displays helpless behavior.

According to the reformulated theory (Abramson, et al., 1978), helplessness may result when the individual believes, 1) that he/she does not posses the ability to control the outcomes, but other people do (personal helplessness) or 2) that no one has the ability required to control the outcome (universal helplessness). In the first case, the

individual believes control is possible, but that he/she lacks the response to control the outcome. The task is seen as a skill task, requiring a skill the individual lacks, and the individual attributes failure to internal factors such as ability.

According to the learned helplessness hypothesis, learning that outcomes are uncontrollable results in three deficits: motivational, cognitive, and emotional. The motivational deficit is seen in retarded initiation of voluntary responses and is reflected in passivity and intellectual slowness. The cognitive deficit is seen in the individual's inability to learn that personal actions determine outcomes. Finally, learned helplessness produces depressed affect and a passive acceptance of outcomes (Abramson et al, 1978).

A review of the literature describing the LD student clearly points to motivational deficits. LD students are described as having poor study skills and lacking persistence. Tollefson, et al (1979) found that junior high school aged LD students did not predict future performance congruent with their past performance. These researchers suggest that LD students do not view outcomes as contingent upon their behavior. These same researchers also found that LD adolescents lacked persistence. They hypothesized that LD students did not persist because they did not believe internal factors (effort or ability) explained achievement outcomes for them.

Recent research also suggests that LD students do not perceive themselves as having internal control over the reinforcers in their school environment. Fincham and Barling (1978) found that LD students ages 9-10 had lower scores on a locus of control scale than nonLD students of the same age. Chapman and Boersma (1979) and Gajar, Cohen, and

Tarver (1978) found LD adolescents had lower scores on internal locus of control measures than their nonLD peers. Pearl et al (1980) found LD children had lower perceptions of internal control over outcomes than nonLD students. LD students were "less likely than their classmates to believe that not trying hard enough was an important reason for their lack of success" (p. 8).

Attributions as the Factors that Distinguish Learned Helpless and Mastery Oriented Students

"Learned helplessness in achievement situations exists when an individual perceives the termination of failure to be independent of his/her response. This perception of failure as insurmountable is associated with attributions of failure to invariant factors, such as ability, and is accompanied by seriously impaired performance" (Dweck, 1975; Dweck & Goetz, 1978, p. 157). Dweck and Repucci (1973) found that children who persisted after failure explained failure by motivational variables and that children who did not persist after failure explained their failure by external factors outside their control.

Diener and Dweck (1978) studied the attributions for failure of helpless and mastery-oriented elementary students. They found that while half the helpless children attributed failure to lack of ability, none of the mastery-oriented children explained their failure by lack of ability. Mastery-oriented children explained their failure by insufficient effort or external factors.

Dweck and Goetz (1978), in comparing the behavior of mastery-oriented and learned helpless children, write: "Mastery-oriented behavior-increased persistence or improved performance in the face of failure-tends to be associated with attributions of failure to variable factors, particularly lack of effort." (p. 157)

The findings of Dweck and her associates are consistent with those of Weiner (1972, 1974, 1979). Weiner found that persons with high achievement motivation and high persistence attribute success in achievement tasks to high ability and personal efforts to succeed. They attribute failure to insufficient effort (Weiner, 1972). Persons with low need to achieve perceive a weak relationship between personal effort and success or failure in achievement tasks. Persons with low achievement motivation are also more likely to attribute failure in achievement tasks to low ability (Weiner, 1972).

Weiner (1979) lists three characteristics which describe students high in achievement motivation: (i.e., mastery-oriented students)

1. They prefer situations in which the consequences of their actions can be ascribed to the person.
2. They have learned to ascribe outcome to effort.
3. They are sensitive and reactive to clues indicating the importance of effort.

Pearl et al (1980), in a study of LD students in grades one through eight and a control group of nonLD students, found that the LD students were less likely to attribute failure to lack of effort and more likely to attribute success to the ease of the task than were control group students. The authors note that this pattern of attributions was found across a variety of domains. They further explained that the attributions of the underachievers were like those of children whose performance deteriorates after failure (p. 8).

In summary, highly successful, achievement oriented individuals take personal responsibility for success rather than attributing it to environmental factors, with a resulting sense of personal pride and

accomplishment. These achievers, when faced with failure, account for it by an unstable cause, the lack of or inappropriateness of effort. These attributions result in continued high expectations for success and persistance at the task.

A Strategy for Reducing Learned Helpless Behavior

According to the learned helplessness hypothesis, helpless students believe that achievement outcomes are unrelated to their personal actions. If the students experience success, they typically do not credit success to their personal abilities or effort. However, if they experience failure, low ability is the frequent causal attribution for failure.

A strategy parents can use to reduce the helpless behavior, i.e. passivity, lack of persistence, and unwillingness to attempt academic tasks, is designed to alter the students' beliefs that their personal behaviors do not affect achievement outcomes. The strategy involves three steps: 1) assisting the student to set realistic achievement goals, 2) helping the student to develop a plan of action to attain the goal, and 3) teaching the student to accept personal responsibility for success or failure by attributing the outcome to effort.

Parents need to establish regularly scheduled times to hold conferences with their student. The first task in the conference is to identify the work to be completed. The student then selects the particular task upon which he/she will work. The choice must remain the exclusive right of the student as the goal of the strategy is to teach the student that his/her behavior determines the outcome.

Goal setting involves specifying a desired level of performance in advance of a task. Quantitative goals (completion of 10 arithmetic

problems by the end of the school day Monday) rather the qualitative goals (doing one's best, trying to do better, etc) should be specified.

The second step involves planning the steps necessary to accomplish the goal. The type of activities to be completed, the place where the activity is to be completed, the time to be spent on the activity, and the person or persons to be contacted for assistance are specified in the plan of action. the parent needs to assist the student in developing the plan of action, but must not develop the plan of action for the student.

After specifying the goal and the plan of action, the student then undertakes the activities specified in the plan of action. The parent should neither "check on the student" nor encourage the student. At the time the goal was to be accomplished, the student and parent meet to determine if the goal has been achieved and to evaluate the appropriateness of the plan of action for attaining the goal. It is at this third step, that the parent assumes the role of a non-judgmental facilitator. The parent and student decide if the goal has been achieved. If the goal was attained the parent states: "you worked hard and followed your plan of action, and for this reason you accomplished your goal. You can be proud that you tried hard and were successful." If the goal is not realized, the parent states: "It is hard when we don't accomplish something we have decided to do, but if you follow your plan and try hard, you may be able to achieve your goal."

The parent and student then take a few minutes to review the goal and determine whether it was realistic. They then consider the plan of action and determine if it was carried out as specified. If the plan of action was completed as specified, the parent tells the student, the

achievement outcome was attained because the student made the effort to follow the plan. The parent again tells the student that he/she can feel good about attaining the goal because he/she worked hard to do so. The message to the student is that personal effort produced a successful outcome. If the plan of action was not completed as specified, the parent and child discuss the modifications the student needs to make in setting goals and developing plans of action. The goal of the third step in the strategy is teaching the student to accept personal responsibility for success by attributing it to effort or failure by attributing it to lack of effort.

The attribution retraining program instituted by the parent must control carefully the difficulty of the academic tasks the students will complete during the training program. The academic tasks need to be matched to the student's current level of academic functioning. Covington and Omelich (1979) discuss the complex interactions that exist between ability, perceived level of effort, and perceptions of ability by self and others. As these authors write, "effort is a double-edged sword" (Covington & Omelich, 1980). To put forth maximum effort and fail, leads to attributions of low ability and a sense of shame. Therefore, the achievement goals and plans of action must be matched to the student's ability and failure should not be purposely programed into the training.

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